

Face to Face

Sunday, October 16, 2005

Proper 24, Year A

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*Once upon a time, not so long ago*, there was a certain small country on the other side of this planet. The nation underwent a great progress over the past two years since the disgraced former king was forced to abdicate and fled the land.

Pretty much everyone in the country welcomed their new monarch. She was a highly charismatic figure, popular with young and old alike, and had a soft, gentle voice that made everyone who listens to her voice feel safe and confident. As the country generally lacked in infrastructure outside its two major cities, most people received news and information through their hand-wind radio receivers. More of a celebrity figure than a royalty, the queen had a daily talk show on public radio, and this immediately became a wildly popular program. People loved her because they could talk about just about anything on the call-in line, and because of the way she lets out such an adorable giggle every so often.

She was known among the populace as the one and only "Lady Katie." People sort of remembered her name was actually Kathleen something, the second eldest daughter of the ex-king's ex-wife. She was a national icon of some sort, commanding people's adoration and respect without demand. Who would not love a queen like her? But because she would only broadcast on radio, nobody has seen her face except for the prime minister's cabinet and members of the parliament.

*In a town near the border*, there was a school teacher. She was sent from a big city to this impoverished town of about 1000 people to fix the educational system. Long out of sight and mind from the media, politicians and general public scrutiny, this forgotten town had been a run-down, crime-infested place no one wanted to visit. The government had neglected this city under the previous reign, and the king did not want to fix anything there because the mafia and warlords who controlled the town paid the king off handsomely and supplied the king with a stable supply of diamonds and petroleum. The national educational minister promised a big bonus to convince this teacher to abandon her position as a vice-principle in a prestigious high school in a very affluent part of the metropolis, pack up and move to what is essentially a big slum where people would literally kill each other over trivial disputes and then loot the victim's house for basic living expenses. Just about every other day, this teacher would call in to complain about what is happening on the air during the Queen Katie show.

Half a year into the school year, the teacher's steam had run out. She no longer feels the sense of mission and vision she once had. She no longer understood what she was doing in this crazy town and why she was working there for less than a half the pay than what she once earned. The teacher became increasingly cynical, angry and depressed. Then she became sick often. All the efforts she put into changing the school soon became wasted as the violence returned to campus. She decided to resign, even though it may mean her career in the field of education would end because the education ministry would probably fire her permanently. She would rather be a waitress than being a teacher in this town.

That evening, the teacher decided to have a drink at a bar. She no longer cared about

anything. She drank until she could forget all the insanity--or at least that was her intention--in reality she drank until everyone around her began thinking she's purely insane. The bouncer kicked her out, and she aimlessly walked into the street.

Later that night, still drunk, she wanted to call into the show bragging about how she quit her insane job at school and that she had given up on education altogether. She turned the radio on, and it turned out that there was someone else on the air; he said the queen is on a "state visit" for an important business and not around.

She walks out of her apartment and goes back downtown hoping she could get another glass of beer. Suddenly, in the middle of the street she stops and began screaming random obscenities about the queen, the educational system and the government bureaucracy. She decided that that queen on the radio talk show was fake, non-existent and that the government she worked for was a big racket.

"That stupid queen ain't real, just a hired voice-over pretending to be the king's successor to cover up the fact that the he left this country in a mess! If she's real she'd better show her face! If she's real she'd better be doing something other than being on radio all the time! I'll believe whatever the nice things she's saying if I see her, but all I see here is the hard, cold reality. She doesn't see all this from the palace."

She collapses as she kept screaming and yelling. Everybody in town ignores her thinking this is yet another insane person and is just another everyday occurrence they are accustomed to. They expected the police or a soldier to come over some time and shoot her, since the town's government no longer has any money left to run any hospital or jail.

From out of darkness, a maiden in a long, flowing robe and a veil walked toward the teacher, who had by then passed out onto the street. The maiden was short and small, covered almost entirely in her robe and veil, so she looked like a nun. She sat down besides the teacher and wrapped her arms around the teacher to pick her up off the pavement, then began gently holding her until her body relaxed.

"Who are you?" The teacher asked. After all this sort of kindness have been so rare in this town. She never expected anyone would care, and that was precisely why she deliberately got herself drunk.

A pair of two deep blue eyes met hers, and even though the face was completely covered in a veil she knew the lady was smiling at her. The lady said nothing. The teacher regained her composure, then went on with telling the lady what transpired and then continued with the same old complaints she kept making on the airwave every other day for the last five months.

The lady in the veil gazed at the teacher with a deep love and gracious acceptance. Then she suddenly spoke, saying, "Amelia, I know. I know everything about that, and everything about you."

It was the voice on the radio talk show -- the very own voice of Her Majesty the Queen. She decided to make a "state visit" to see the disillusioned teacher.

"But," the ever-sceptical teacher would object. "How do I know if you're real? Are you a real queen, or just a voice-over hired by the government to cover up that disgraced king's scandalous departure into exile?"

"Amelia. I'm Katie. The Queen. That silly giggly girl on the radio you always talked to. No wonder why I know your name and what's going on in your life, yes?"

Miss Amelia no longer felt like she was being ignored and abandoned by the world and doomed in what she thought of as a cheap, dead-end job. Her sense of mission and vision as an

career educator for the school she was assigned to was re-ignited. She now knew the Queen was paying attention, and took her plight seriously. Even more, she knew that the Queen takes education in this hinterland of the oppressed and forgotten people seriously.

Within two years, Miss Amelia singlehandedly transformed the school, gotten rid of gang activities, inspired the local officials to implement many plans, slashed the town's unemployment down to slightly below the national average. Three years after that night when she was extremely drunk, that night she met the Queen, Miss Amelia was invited by the prime minister to receive the title of peerage at the royal palace. Only this time, Amelia could see Lady Katie's face and she was wearing a prettier dress. But that did not really matter to Amelia. Her real inspiration came from the fact that someone cared enough to know her name and took time to travel and meet her, on the day that was most likely the lowest point in her whole life.

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The mayor of the City of Portland (Oregon) knows my name. I have known Tom Potter, Karin Hansen (Tom's wife), and his daughter Katie since before Tom was elected to the office. Earlier in Tom's term, I would bump into Tom and Karin quite often whenever there was a festival or community event around town. I was impressed by them for remembering my name every single time.

About half a year ago I was riding the Portland Streetcar and spotted the former mayor, Vera Katz. She looked quite frail. She, unlike Tom Potter, does not know my name.

We humans I think have a deep need for recognition. So when someone whom the society perceives to be important knows you, you feel important and that changes the whole mindset. In this world, who knows you is important. Whom you know, is also important. Then, isn't it important that you know the supreme God who reigns over the universe? That God knows your name?

Today's lectionary passage includes the 33rd chapter of Exodus, among others. This is one of the most well-preached part of the Hebrew Bible by Christians, so I am giving a new twist to this by just focusing on one thing. Sometimes we get more out of repeatedly meditating on one or two verses from the Scriptures than going through chapters and chapters.

Exodus 33:17. *The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'* (NRSV)

The story I just told is an adaptation of the theme from this Exodus text. Like Miss Amelia, Moses was a leadership figure working under a stressful and unclear environment, nearing burn-out because of prolonged frustration and not being able to see the end of his labour. Like Miss Amelia, Moses had a vision and sense of mission which he believed to be from the divine origin. Moses was just as fired up with his struggle for liberty as Miss Amelia was with her vision of cleaning up the school and improving the academics. Moses prayed to God constantly, and even met God in Sinai, kept complaining about his people and the plight Moses was put in. But he still did not feel confident; in fact the more things unravel and people began giving Moses a hard time, the less he became certain of his call or mission. He too, was ready to give up.

The answer God gave Moses here to clear up his lack of confidence, however, was not some kind of pep-talk, or self-help advice. All what it took was to let him know that God knew Moses by name, and that Moses is under God's favour (or acceptance, or grace), and because of

that, God will be with Moses along his journey.

I want you to know this day: God knows you by name, too. And you are favoured by, accepted by, and under the grace of the Most High. Just like Queen Katie in the story, God listens to every bit of your concern, and takes you seriously.

In the movie *Patch Adams* played by Robin Williams, there is a scene in which medical students are given a tour of the university hospital by their professor. The professor proudly and arrogantly point to random patients and describe them by symptoms, diseases and numbers. Then the professor stops at a patient lying on a gurney, medical students surround the gurney, and he gives a short lecture using the patient as a teaching tool. Being surrounded by medical students and hearing long, unfamiliar medical terminology, the patient feels scared and restless. Then the professor stops and asks, "any question?"

Patch Adams suddenly asks, "What's her name?"

Another thing I want to bring up along with this is this: Just as Moses was encouraged by God who knew him by name, we too can become encouragement -- or even life-savers -- by making a conscious effort to know other people, not just as "that guy next door", "that patient with whatever the disease", "that new employee" or "case number 05A-20192", but by their names. And that takes our conscious efforts. But it is worth an effort. For this week, let us try something different for a change: try remembering the names of a few people we interact with. On this earth, we are images and likeness of God; as Christians, we are living modern-day embodiment of Christ. So it is natural for us to know people by their names and give them loving encouragement.

This week's lectionary texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9;  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22.

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